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LECTURES

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

MERCANTILE LIBRARY

ASSOCIATION,

CLINTON-HALL.

AMERICAN CRITICISM ON AMERICAN LITERATURE:

BY

EDWARD S. GOULD, ESQ.,

December 23, 1835.

THE BENEFITS AND INFLUENCES OF COMMERCE:

BY

JOHN H. GOURLIE, ESQ.,

January 5, 1836.

NEW-YORK:.

PRINTED FOR THE MERCANTILE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION.

1836.

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*Extract from the Minutes of the Mercantile Library Association,
January 9, 1836.*

RESOLVED—That the thanks of the Mercantile Library Association be tendered to EDWARD S. GOULD and JOHN H. GOURLIN, for the very able and instructive Lectures delivered by them before its members and friends; and that the Secretary be directed to request their permission to publish those Lectures, as an additional gratification to that we already experience at being enabled to claim them as members of our Association.

NEW-YORK, Jan. 31, 1836.

SIR,

I am much gratified with the approbation of my Lecture, expressed by the Board of Directors of the Mercantile Library Association.

The publication of this Lecture was not originally contemplated or intended. I was, and am, aware that its tenor and strictures must necessarily give offence to some, and probably induce personal replies; for I have lived long enough to know, that nothing in criticism is so offensive to the parties interested—as truth. I was, however, by the solicitation of my particular friend, the Editor of the Literary and Theological Review, induced to consent to his publishing the Lecture in his March number; and since the question of publicity is thus decided, I can of course have no hesitation in complying with the request of your Directors.

You will oblige me by expressing to them the pleasure and the pride I feel in acknowledging the compliment they have accorded to me; and I beg that they will receive assurances of my personal regard, together with my best wishes for the prosperity of the flourishing institution now under their charge.

I am, sir, yours truly,

EDWARD S. GOULD.

To the Secretary of the M. L. Association.

NEW-YORK, Jan. 26, 1836.

SIR,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication, requesting a copy of my Lecture delivered before the members of the Mercantile Library Association for publication, and also a copy of the Resolutions passed by the Board of Directors in reference to the same.

I feel myself flattered by this evidence of their approbation, and shall take the earliest opportunity of preparing a copy of my Lecture to be at their disposal.

I beg leave to present, through, you my best wishes for their individual happiness and the prosperity of their most excellent institution.

Your obedient servant,

JOHN H. GOURLIE.

To the Secretary of the M. L. Association.

1. The Commission has been informed that the following information was received from the Bureau of the Census:

On January 1, 1964, the Bureau of the Census reported that the total population of the United States was 190,000,000. The population of the United States in 1964 was 190,000,000. The population of the United States in 1964 was 190,000,000.

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Reference is made to the report of the Bureau of the Census dated January 1, 1964.

LECTURE I.

BY EDWARD S. GOULD.

AMERICAN CRITICISM

ON

AMERICAN LITERATURE.

THE title of "*American Criticism on American Literature*" has been chosen for the following remarks, because it is more concise than any other that suggested itself: but, to ensure a distinct understanding, at the commencement, of what is proposed, it may be well to explain, that the term "American Literature," in this instance, refers exclusively to that part of our Polite Literature generally designated as "fictitious writings;" and that the criticisms on the various works of that character, as they appear in our daily and weekly papers, monthly magazines, and quarterly reviews, will be the principal subject of discussion.

The Polite Literature of America has thus far been prolific beyond all precedent in other countries—beyond all expectation in our own. Within the short period of fifty years, it has increased, from a few straggling volumes, to the full compass of a National Library. It already embraces works in every department of letters, and has attained an excellence and a celebrity which no other people, of age and advantages similar to our own, have equalled. Here, as in every chapter of our country's history, may be read the proof

of our unparalleled national growth ; and perhaps this is the only instance in which there is reason to fear that our progress is too rapid, and our growth unsound.

It is true that, in many departments of abstract science, as well as in Theology, in Law, in Medicine and Surgery, in Oratory, and in the Mechanical Arts, we have attained a degree of excellence that, probably, is not surpassed by any people under the sun. But in Polite Literature, our American writers have much to accomplish ere they can stand side by side with the gifted authors of older climes, who draw their first breath in the very groves of the Academy, and inhale inspiration with every breeze that sweeps over the tombs of the immortal dead. I would not, however, by such an allusion, detract one iota from the actual merits of our own writers ; nor imply, that the distance between our national literature and that of other countries is impassable. I would, rather, exult in the belief that our writers have already won laurels of enduring freshness and beauty ; that, whatever may be our comparative deficiencies, our career in Polite Literature is, now, no more an experiment than the principles and power of the Constitution which cements our Union together ; and, that our literary immortality is now no more a matter of contingency, than the question whether our country is rapidly advancing to the highest pitch of national grandeur.

In fact, our having attained excellence in both Literature and the Fine Arts, is not, and cannot be a subject of doubt ; but an inquiry must necessarily arise as to the *degrees* of that excellence, and the answer involves high interests, and requires great consideration.

To a certain extent, our improvement in those departments may have kept pace with our national prosperity ; but there is a point where (for various reasons) mental acquisition ceases to proceed with the same rapidity as mere physical growth—and at that point we have some time since

arrived. For while our country has advanced far toward the summit of physical eminence and power, she is yet, as regards Literature and the Arts, far below the highest attainable elevation of fame. A mere reference to names will sustain this assertion. We have sculptors, painters, novelists, and poets; but we have *not* a CANOVA, a RAPHAEL, a SCOTT, or a SHAKSPERE. Nay, we not only have them not, but the incidental repetition of their very names seems to send a chill of discouragement and despair through the mind, even when excited by its wildest hopes and boldest imaginings.

But, although such discouragement is the natural consequence of a first impression, it has no foundation in reason. The repetition of the names of "the mighty dead" ought to inspire ambition, rather than produce despondency. Emulation is the appropriate result of musing over the monuments of by-gone greatness: but if we can call up the recollection of what has been, only to be alarmed and intimidated at the grandeur of the apparition, we had much better forget that "such things were." There are, in truth, neither moral nor physical causes to *prevent*, though, unhappily, there may be some to *delay*, our attaining that degree of eminence in Literature and the Arts which other and older nations enjoy; and a consideration of the causes of such delay, so far as they are identified with the character of our National Criticism, is the chief object of the present remarks.

It may be stated, in general terms, that the prominent obstacles to our more rapid advancement in letters are—

An unfortunate propensity, on the part of the public, to admire indiscriminately, and with little qualification, *every thing American*; and

The want of an effective and independent censorship in the department of our Literary Reviews.

It is possible that, in times past, Americans deferred too much to the literature of the mother country. It may be.

true, that we once dared not admire a book of domestic origin, until an imported opinion favourably preceded its introduction to its native country. It may, even, be true, (and it may also be doubted,) that the boisterous and arrogant denunciation of *all* deference to foreign talents and opinions, which has recently been trumpeted among us by parties personally interested, was in some measure called for and deserved. But that day has gone by—American writers are just now in no danger of neglect, or of wasting their sweetness on the desert air. They have no longer to contend with the apathy or incredulity of their countrymen, as touching their fame and their ability: they have only to scribble over a given number of quires, and their reputation is established. The public have fallen into that comfortable position assigned to them by Sheridan; they “do not undergo the fatigue of judging for themselves.” They have an opinion, certainly; and it is of sufficient potency to decide the fate of a whole generation of authors: but, under the existing circumstances, it is most unfortunate that this opinion is originated and controlled by our Literary Reviews.

If these Reviews could happen to be strictly intelligent, discriminating, and impartial, our present subjection to them were the most propitious infliction that we could possibly sustain: for human taste is too incorrigibly lawless, to be governed on republican principles. If it be true, in political science, that many communities are either too fickle, or too depraved to enjoy rational liberty, without abusing it, and they therefore must be ruled with a rod of iron; equally true is it that the public taste, in all communities, is too erratic to be trusted in any other guardianship, than the stern despotism of a literary tribunal. And the moment that such a tribunal is founded, and directed on the principles of truth and impartiality, the *desideratum*, in that department, is realized.

Should this be deemed an undeserved reproach on the public taste, an example from past days is at hand, which

fully justifies it. The ever memorable DELLA CRUSCAN mania, in the time of WILLIAM GIFFORD, is a striking instance of the extravagance and folly into which the public taste, in an enlightened community, may degenerate, when that taste comes under the detestable influence of *Fashion*, and is unchecked by the Spartan firmness and valour of sound criticism. We can also learn from that astounding precedent the danger of license to authors, as well as of forbearance on the part of their legitimate monitors: and we should do well to remember, that although the same tolerance on the part of the public, and the same apathy and neglect on the part of the Reviewers, will always tend to the same disastrous results; there may *not* always be found a GIFFORD to correct them.

Whether we are to have a Della Cruscan age of our own, it is not easy to say; but it is certain that we shall not escape such disgrace through the present exertions of our Critics. The encroachment of false taste is, apparently, the least of their concern; and the success of any innovation, however monstrous, would seem to be a matter in which they take no interest. At least, it is true that, as a body, they evince no interest in the welfare of our Literature, by expending time or talent in its revision. Their criticisms are, for the most part, *superficial* in every particular. They very seldom descend to the *analysis* of merit and demerit, in detail. They give no *reasons* why this is pronounced excellent; or that, execrable. They deal chiefly in general terms, and hyperbole; seize some one prominent feature, and make that the criterion for their verdict; and, by means of extracts, fill up a large space with the sentiments of the author, which should be occupied by their own.*

* It may be added to this enumeration of the qualities of contemporary critics, that some of them display a brilliancy, an acuteness, and an originality worthy of all praise, in metaphorical comparison: a style of puffing, which is more brief, yet more comprehensive, than any other. After all epithets fail, the author under review is summarily dubbed *the American Homer*, *the American*,

It is, at first sight, inexplicable, that they who, by tacit consent, occupy the post of guardians of the public taste, and the welfare of Literature, should so far neglect their high trust, and betray the confidence reposed in them; but some of the causes of their delinquency may easily be explained.

I. In the first place, whoever writes or publishes a book, sends copies, *with his compliments*, to the several editors. This, in many cases, puts an end to fault-finding, at least; and, as a general rule, the editor must, in common courtesy, either give a favourable notice, or announce the title of the book in capitals, state who has it for sale, and add, that "want of room" excludes any remarks for to-day, or, for this number. This sort of practical bribery was harmless enough, when it was confined to some new invention in mechanical art; a basket of gooseberries, or a mammoth-turnip. If an editor received something of this kind, and chose to pay for it in compliments, it was "a fair business transaction," and no one was essentially injured or deceived by it. But when, in accordance to the same plan, the works of genius and imagination are substituted for the products of vegetable growth, or mechanical ingenuity, and the compliments *they* elicit go forth to the world as disinterested opinions, and are suffered to ingraft corruption on the public taste, the merits of the custom are changed, and its evils are painfully apparent.

II. In the second place, it is no uncommon thing for an author or publisher to employ a literary friend to prepare an assortment of impartial and discriminating articles on a new book. These, some editors will always publish, because they are unwilling to disoblige the applicant; or because they are thus saved the trouble of writing themselves; or because they take no interest in the matter whatever. Never-

Goldsmith, the American Addison, &c. When we come to be possessed of an AMERICAN MILTON, and an AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE, (events not far distant, if analogy proves any thing,) we shall probably cease to make progress in literary excellence, from sheer lack of competition!

theless, as such articles go abroad with the editor's sanction, they carry with them his influence in favour of a particular book; although they were written under the eye, and perhaps at the dictation, of the author they applaud! It is needless to add, that such reviews give to the world a *very* correct notion of the merits of a book.

III. A third cause—and one which has influence with some of the few Critics who really seem to feel interested in the prosperity of our National Literature—is to be found in a sincere disposition to encourage the growth of native genius; combined with a fear of checking that growth by what they call *premature*, but what would be, in fact, *deserved*, severity. That is to say, a Critic will praise a book highly, which he well knows is unworthy of such praise, in order to *encourage* its writer. This is an instance of the best of motives, accompanied by the worst of judgment. No permanent benefit can accrue to Literature, nor to any thing else, by means of a system of deception, and which has no better plea than expediency. That which cannot be supported by truth, cannot long be sustained by any means whatever. But, apart from that moral vacillation which suppresses truth, for the purpose of encouragement to native genius, the plan is absurd on philosophical principles. The praise bestowed, indiscriminately, on writers of great merit, and little merit, and no merit, with a view to encourage whatever of genius exists in the mass; fails entirely in its object, and ceases to be encouragement, from the very fact of its being general. If the design were to encourage blockheads, the plan is well devised; but genius is usually too selfish and too jealous to relish a partition of its exclusive rights; and is disgusted, not encouraged, by being placed on a par with the multitude. The school master, who flogged all around the class, to ensure the punishment of one whom he could not individually detect; displayed the same sagacity as the critic who praises all to the very extent of his power, lest some one deserving of praise

should happen to be omitted. In either case, the moral effect of the reward is entirely lost.

IV. Another cause is an apprehension, on the part of many Editors, that the public will not sustain them in severe criticism on American productions. This is an erroneous view of the case, in every sense. In the first place, it is the province and the duty of a critic, to direct the public taste, and not to be governed by it: and if he has talent and honesty, he can accomplish this duty; and if he has not talent and honesty, he has mistaken his vocation. In the second place, it is absurd to imagine that what has never yet occurred in the literary history of any other country, is likely now to occur in this. And in the third place, it will be early enough for editors to plead this excuse, when, by experience, they have proved its validity. Besides, where is our boasted freedom of discussion and liberty of the press, if, even on literary questions, the opinions of an editor are to be overawed by the denunciation of his subscribers? To avoid misapprehension, however, it may be well to say, that severity, as an abstract quality, is of no benefit to Criticism: if not deserved, or not applied with discrimination, it is just as false and contemptible as the opposite extreme. In the practice of *unwarranted* severity, an Editor may very properly fear that the public will not sustain him.

V. Again, it is not always agreeable to the private feelings of Editors or Critics, to speak freely of the faults of a living writer, whom they often meet personally, and perhaps personally respect: and here the ceaseless strain of panegyric finds another cause of continuance. The Critic has not the independence to advocate the welfare of Literature on its own merits; but rather suffers himself to be blinded to the truth that his social and professional duties are entirely distinct from each other; and that the author and the man, in a literary point of view, are by no means identical. It must be acknowledged, that the duty, in the case sup-

posed, is perplexing and painful—and so it may be painful to a judge, when he is required to pass sentence on a criminal, who was his friend; but, nevertheless, whoever takes upon himself the office of criticism, takes upon himself, at the same time, certain duties and obligations which he cannot honourably or honestly disregard: and it is too late for him to be governed by his feelings, after those duties are once fully assumed. If Critics are to be influenced by personal considerations, either for or against the authors they review, then Criticism is all a farce, and had better be abolished by acclamation.

VI. Another cause is, that happy coincidence of interests, which induces many of our popular novelists and poets to become contributors to sundry of the papers and magazines. It certainly is right and proper that these writers should labour to elevate the character of our Periodical Literature; and it certainly would be wrong and highly improper for the editors of such periodicals to speak ill of their best friends. Besides, there is great advantage to be gained by rearing a man's monument, as well as in writing his biography, while he yet breathes. He is thereby enabled to judge of his own epitaph; and reward the sculptor for registering qualities, the existence of which might otherwise never have been suspected—and which, when recorded, slumber as coldly in the soul as on the marble.

VII. The last cause that will now be considered, is to be found in the fact, that the production of sound and genuine Criticism, like that of genuine poetry, or any other kind of writing in its purity, requires much more labour, much more study, and much more talent—than that of its spurious substitute. And assuming (what is clearly proved by results) that the majority of our Critics regard their labour as drudgery, and its accomplishment as their chief object; assuming that they have no higher interest in their professional duties, than a desire to get through with them, regardless of the ten-

deney or effect of the performance ; it is obvious that their inducements to write at all are very slight, and are all on the side of error and corruption—and it is not strange that their Criticisms are tainted with both.

As a general rule, (for there are honourable exceptions,) they whose business it is to *do* Criticism, seem really not to be aware of the dignity and importance of their vocation, nor of the capabilities of the style of writing belonging to it. And instead of considering what they owe to the public ; or the value of their services, (when properly rendered,) both to the public, and to the cause of Literature, they are glad of an opportunity to shuffle off their task on literary friends, who may, or not, be qualified to perform it. They seem, indeed, to entertain the opinion that the greater part of what is called Criticism, may be as well despatched by apprentices, as by master workmen ; and that a man requires no more brains to write a suitable Review, than an intelligible advertisement, of a literary work. But, whatever these Critics may think, or seem to think, it is still incontrovertibly true, that Criticism is itself a high department of Literature, and capable of displaying a degree of intellectual power equal to almost any kind of writing whatever. JOHNSON'S Review of MILTON may, perhaps, be cited as a proof of the perfection to which Criticism may attain, and of the talent it may embody. It is an illustrious specimen of impartial analysis both of the defects and the beauties of an author ; and it transmits to the reader in distant ages the privilege of studying that great master of verse with the comprehensive intelligence and the disciplined judgment of JOHNSON'S gigantic mind. On the other hand, GIFFORD'S *Bayard* and *Maviad* will ever endure as terrible examples of the Criticism which unmasks folly, and consigns its authors to an immortality of shame. And, if our Critics would condescend to study and meditate on these noble specimens of the art, they would, by the mere force of example, be compelled to

adopt a tone of sentiments and language worthy of American Reviewers.

The causes to which I have imputed the delinquency of the majority of American Critics, and the present character of their Reviews, have now been sufficiently explained to show, that, at least, those Reviews are written under very unfavourable influences; and it is no great extent of presumption to say, that while they continue to be thus written, their being utterly and universally in error, is almost a matter of course.

It is now time to turn from causes to effects, and examine a little more closely into the characteristics of American Criticism, *as it is*. And, as an auxiliary to the research, it will be useful to read the following extract from *Paul Clifford*.

" 'Criticism is a great science—a very great science! It may be divided into three branches, viz. *to tickle, to slash, and to plaster*. In each of these three, I believe, without vanity, I am a profound adept! I will initiate you into all. Your labours shall begin this very evening. I have three works on my table, which must be despatched by to-morrow night. I will take the most arduous, and abandon to you the others. The three consist of a Romance, an Epic, in twelve books, and an Inquiry into the Human Mind, in three volumes. I will tickle the Romance; and you, Paul, shall, this very evening, plaster the Epic, and slash the Inquiry!'

" 'Heavens, Mr. Mac Grawler! cried Paul, in great consternation, 'what do you mean? I should not be able to read an Epic in twelve books; and I should fall asleep over the first page of the Inquiry. I pray you, sir, leave me the Romance, and take the others under your own protection.'

" 'No, young gentleman!' said the critic, solemnly: 'the Romance must be tickled; and it is not given to raw beginners, to conquer that great mystery of our Science.'

“ ‘Before we proceed further,’ replied Paul, ‘explain the three branches of this Science.’

“ ‘Listen, then,’ rejoined Mac Grawler. ‘*To slash*, is, speaking grammatically, to employ the accusative, or accusing case; you must cut up your book right and left, top and bottom, root and branch. *To plaster*, is to employ the dative, or giving case; and you must bestow on the work all the superlatives in the language. You must lay on your praise thick and thin, and not leave a crevice untroweled. But *to tickle*, sir, is a comprehensive business! It comprises all the infinite varieties that fill the interval between *slashing* and *plastering*. This is the nicety of the art, and you can acquire it only by practice. A few examples will suffice to give you an idea of its delicacy.

‘ We will begin with the *encouraging tickle*.

‘ *Although this work is full of faults, though the characters are unnatural, the plot utterly improbable, the thoughts hack-nied, and the style ungrammatical, yet we would, by no means, discourage the author from proceeding; and in the meanwhile, we confidently recommend his work to the attention of the reading public.*

‘ Take, now, the *advising tickle*.

‘ *There is a good deal of merit in these little volumes, although we must regret the evident haste with which they were written. The author might do better. We recommend to him a study of the best writers:—then conclude by a Latin quotation, which you may take from one of the mottos in the Spectator.*

‘ There is a great variety of other tickles: the *familiar*; the *vulgar*; the *polite*; the *good-natured*; the *bitter*; but, in general, all tickles are meant to mean one or the other of these things, viz. *This book would be exceedingly good, if it were not exceedingly bad: or, This book would be exceedingly bad, if it were not exceedingly good.*

‘ There is another grand difficulty attendant on this class

of Criticism ;—it is generally requisite to read a few pages of the work before you begin, because we seldom *tickle*, without giving extracts ; and it requires some judgment to make the extracts and context agree. But when you *slash* or *plaster*, you need neither read, nor extract. When you *slash*, it is better, in general, to conclude with this :

'After what we have said, it is unnecessary to add, that we cannot offend the taste of our readers, by any quotations from this execrable trash.

'And when you plaster, wind up with saying,

'We regret that our limits will not allow us to give any extract, from this wonderful and unrivalled work : we must refer our readers to the book itself.'"

The satire of this sketch is so broad, that it really seems like caricature ; yet the drawing is much nearer to life than our critics will be likely to acknowledge. It may be, indeed, that they do not avow their principles as ingenuously as *Peter Mac Grawler* ; but they are equally obnoxious to the charge of giving currency to false doctrine in Literature, and of misleading those who rely on their published opinions.

If this accusation be deemed unfair, or ill-founded, the obvious inference from the following fact will fully sustain it.

THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE RANGE OF THE CURRENT REVIEWS OF AMERICAN BOOKS, NINE OUT OF TEN ARE HIGHLY COMMENDATORY REVIEWS. They are made up, in general, of that unqualified and indiscriminate praise which *Mac Grawler* denominates *plastering* ; they are occasionally varied by the various modes of *tickling* ; they are very seldom interrupted by the process of *slashing* ; and never, unless as exceptions to the general rule, do they contain the elements of sound and impartial criticism. It does, indeed, sometimes happen that, in the course of a review, trifling faults are designated ; but it is obvious that this is done, either for a show of impartiality, or to set the praise in bolder relief ; for the faults, thus specified, are usually explained away and apologised for before the article is concluded.

Now is it to be supposed, on any rational principle of estimation, that among the never-ending scores of American writers, at the present day, nine out of ten do really *deserve* the embalming of periodical and unqualified praise? Is it to be believed, that nine out of ten do really *merit* a niche in our (future) Pantheon? or, do really *win* a literary immortality? If they *do* deserve such boundless commendation and reward, then, verily, the age we live in is as far before the Augustan ages of Great Britain and of Rome, as *they* were in advance of the barbarism of primitive Rome, and the darkness of feudal Europe. But, that our Literature is *not* thus in advance of the civilized world, and, therefore, that the Criticism which (practically) assigns such a position to it is unsound and deceptive, I shall now attempt to prove by the argument embraced in the following syllogism.

I. *The most distinguished writers of Great Britain, in the present age, are essentially superior to the most distinguished writers of America.*

II. *The most distinguished writers of Great Britain have never received from the British Critics a greater amount of unqualified praise, and high panegyric, than the most distinguished writers of America have received from the American Critics.*

III. *It follows, then, either that the British Critics praise their writers far too little; or, that the American Critics praise their writers far too much.*

Taking these three propositions in their order, it must first be shown, that *the most distinguished writers of Great Britain are essentially superior to the most distinguished writers of America.*

It will be obvious to all, that the only way of approaching this point is through the medium of individual comparison: and as such comparison is called for by the very nature of the argument, I trust that the unpopular experiment of attaching a lower estimate to American authors than our own Critics are wont to do, will at least escape the imputa-

tion of unworthy motives. I would say, further, that as this whole discussion is on the subject of American Criticism, and not (unless incidentally) of American Literature, it would be equally intrusive and tedious to attempt here an analysis of the individual merit of foreign and native writers: the utmost that the case requires, or of which it admits, is a passing remark on each of those who will now be designated—without intentional injustice to any one omitted—as the most eminent contemporary writers in the two countries respectively.

Great Britain, then, has produced SCOTT, BULWER, JAMES, MARRYATT, D'ISRAELI:—BYRON, CAMPBELL, MONTGOMERY, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE:—HANNAH MORE, MRS. SHEPWOOD, MISS EDGEWORTH, JOANNA BAILEY, and MRS. HEMANS.

And, to vie with this brilliant galaxy, we have IRVING, COOPER, PAULDING, BROWN, BIRD, SIMMS, KENNEDY:—DANA, DRAKE, HALLECK, BRYANT, PERCIVAL, PINKNEY:—MISS SEDGWICK, and Miss H. F. GOULD.*

Is it possible for a community, entertaining impartial opinions, to concur in the belief that these American writers possess ability and talents equal to their distinguished contemporaries across the Atlantic? An opinion founded on the principle of considerations and allowances—an opinion influenced by the comparative age and opportunities of the two countries, is not the opinion challenged, or that under discussion. The tone of our Reviews is unqualified by any proviso; their tone is absolute, and without any reserve for a deficiency of advantages on our part: and therefore this investigation and comparison, having been called forth by the tone and character of those Reviews, must be pursued, also, without qualification. In this sense, the question is

* The coincidence of names might lead some to suppose that the writer is here evincing the partiality of relationship, and this note is introduced merely to disprove such a supposition. Miss Gould's acknowledged talents are the only, and the sufficient reason for her being placed among our eminent authors.

proposed and repeated, Do our American writers possess ability and talents equal to their distinguished contemporaries across the Atlantic?

The question is asked in a spirit of fairness, and with no shadow of intention to disparage the brilliancy of that talent, which we are all proud to call American. The question is asked argumentatively, and dispassionately; and with no other object than properly to follow out the investigation, and ascertain whether we, as a people, do over-estimate the talents we possess; and, by such over-estimate, deceive ourselves, and mislead those gifted ones among us, who have already won, for themselves, and for their country, imperishable renown. Let us render to them *all* the homage they have deserved: but let us, also, make that desert the strict rule and measure of that homage.

WALTER SCOTT, by universal consent—I say *universal*, for in my life I have heard but *two* dissenting voices—WALTER SCOTT, by universal consent is the monarch and master of modern fiction. It is true, the monstrous assumption has been in two instances circulated among us, that he who is called the *American Walter Scott*, is the full-grown rival—the successful competitor—the *equal*, AT LEAST, of his illustrious prototype!! But as that assumption has been patronized by a distressingly minute minority of Americans—and Americans, certainly, are most interested in according to COOPER all the honour he really deserves—it is manifest that the comparison, thus far, is immensely in favour of Great Britain.

BULWER, as a novelist, must be ranked next to SCOTT, in the scale of intellectual power; and although his genius has been perverted by his immorality, his works must endure for centuries yet to come. Genius is of itself, and necessarily, immortal. Its fires will irradiate, and its spirit will embalm the musings and the fame of its possessor: but, in the words of his own beautiful simile, the fame of BULWER

will fling its brightness down the long vista of ages, partly by reason of the errors and imperfections of the character whence it emanates.*

The second American novelist is PAULDING, and he is extensively and deservedly honoured as such. His fame, like COOPER's, is widely spread; and his talents, like COOPER's, are universally admired: but the placing of his genius and ability on a level with BULWER's, is what was probably never yet attempted, nor regarded as among possibilities.

The writings of JAMES, MARRYAT, and D'ISRAELI, have gained universal, though various, popularity. Any one of the three authors has sufficient talent to confer lasting distinction on the land of his birth; and, in the absence of still greater lights, would brilliantly illuminate the literary firmament.

On the other hand, great praise must, and assuredly will, be awarded to BROWN, BIRD, SIMMS, and KENNEDY; but the comparison, nevertheless, cannot result to their advantage.

In poetry, we have DANA, DRAKE, HALLECK, BRYANT PERCIVAL, PINKNEY, and Miss H. F. GOULD. Proud names they are; and some of them, perhaps, immortalized in Song. Yet, what a contrast must we all acknowledge when we turn to BYRON, SCOTT, CAMPBELL, MONTGOMERY, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE, JOANNA BAILEY, and Mrs. HEMANS!

Great Britain has produced HANNAH MORE, Mrs. SHERWOOD, and Miss EDGEWORTH: a combination of female genius and greatness, such as the world never before saw. Their writings have done more to elevate the female character—to ennoble the cause of Letters—and to give an

* "There is one circumstance that should diminish our respect for renown. Errors of life, as well as foibles of character, are often the real enhancers of celebrity. Without his errors, I doubt whether HENRI QUATRE would have become the idol of a people. How many Whartons has the world known, who, deprived of their frailties, had been inglorious! The light that you so admire, reaches you through the distance of time, only on account of the angles and unevenness of the body whence it emanates. Were the surface of the moon smooth, it would be invisible."—EVANS'S ARAM.

undying reputation to the land of their nativity, than the combined literary works of all the other females to whom Great Britain has given birth.

To attempt a comparison between these remarkable women, and the authoress of *HORSE LESLIE*, would be mutual injustice. We take pride in the renown which *HORSE LESLIE* has secured to our countrywoman; and the more especially, because its writer is the *only daughter* which Fame has vouchsafed to our family compact of novelists. But we should value the reputation she has acquired too highly to contrast it with the pre-eminent brilliancy which irradiates the names of *MORE*, *SHERWOOD*, and *EDGEWORTH*.

One writer we have, who is unrivalled on his own peculiar field of enduring renown. The richness of his invention, the purity of his language, and the singular versatility of his genius, have conspired to render him emphatically the favourite of his countrymen. And while we have exulted in the production, England has well prided herself on the temporary adoption, of *WASHINGTON IRVING*.

Here, then, let the comparison cease; and what is its result? There is neither presumption nor risk of contradiction in asserting, that its result is the establishing of the first proposition:—that, *The most distinguished writers of Great Britain, are essentially superior to the most distinguished writers of America.*

The second proposition of the argument, and that next to be considered, is this: *The most distinguished writers of Great Britain have never received from the British Critics a greater amount of unqualified praise, and high panegyric, than the most distinguished writers of America have received from the American Critics.*

The proof of this proposition is the simplest imaginable. The dictionary, the arithmetic, and the American Reviews, furnish all the requisite testimony. The dictionary contains

"all the superlatives in the language;" the arithmetic shows the greatest number of combinations of which they are capable; and the Reviews give the sum total. Now, as the sum total is exactly *the whole* of these superlatives, and as the British Critics cannot well appropriate to British writers *any more* than the whole, it follows inevitably, that—*The most distinguished writers of Great Britain have never received from the British Critics a greater amount of unqualified praise, and high panegyric, than the most distinguished writers of America have received from the American Critics.*

Agreeably to the rules of argument, the question of fact is now reduced to the single contingency embraced in the third proposition: viz. *The American Critics praise too much, unless the British Critics praise too little.* This contingency, however, does not need consideration. The proposition was originally stated, merely to comply with the logical form of argument, and not because it admitted of question, or required proof. That the British Critics *do* underrate British talent, in the aggregate, is a position that could never be seriously assumed by any one, and it would therefore be idle to argue against it.

I trust that it will not be deemed presumptuous, if I here take leave of the argument, in the belief that these two positions are sufficiently established; viz.

The ordinary tone of American Criticism is very high panegyric; and,

Very high panegyric, as applied indiscriminately to American Literature, is quite beyond the intrinsic merits of its object.

It will not, however, be forgotten, that all that has been said of the merits of American writers, is either in the way of comparison, or in reply to the extravagance of American Critics. It is, and it ever will be a matter of astonish-

ment, that a people so young ; so comparatively limited in opportunities of cultivating polite literature ; so recently emerging from the chaos of a Revolution, and so wholly absorbed in modelling and adorning the civil institutions which that Revolution disenthralled—it is, indeed, a matter of unqualified wonder, that, despite such adverse circumstances, such a people should have produced a race of men, willing to contend, and capable of contending for the undying honours of Literary fame. Their unprecedented success is their best eulogium, and their highest reward. And now, if they can escape the dangerous influences of flattery on the one hand, and of vanity on the other ; if, unlike ordinary men, they are not ruined by the various contingencies of prosperity, we shall have little cause for solicitude about their future career.

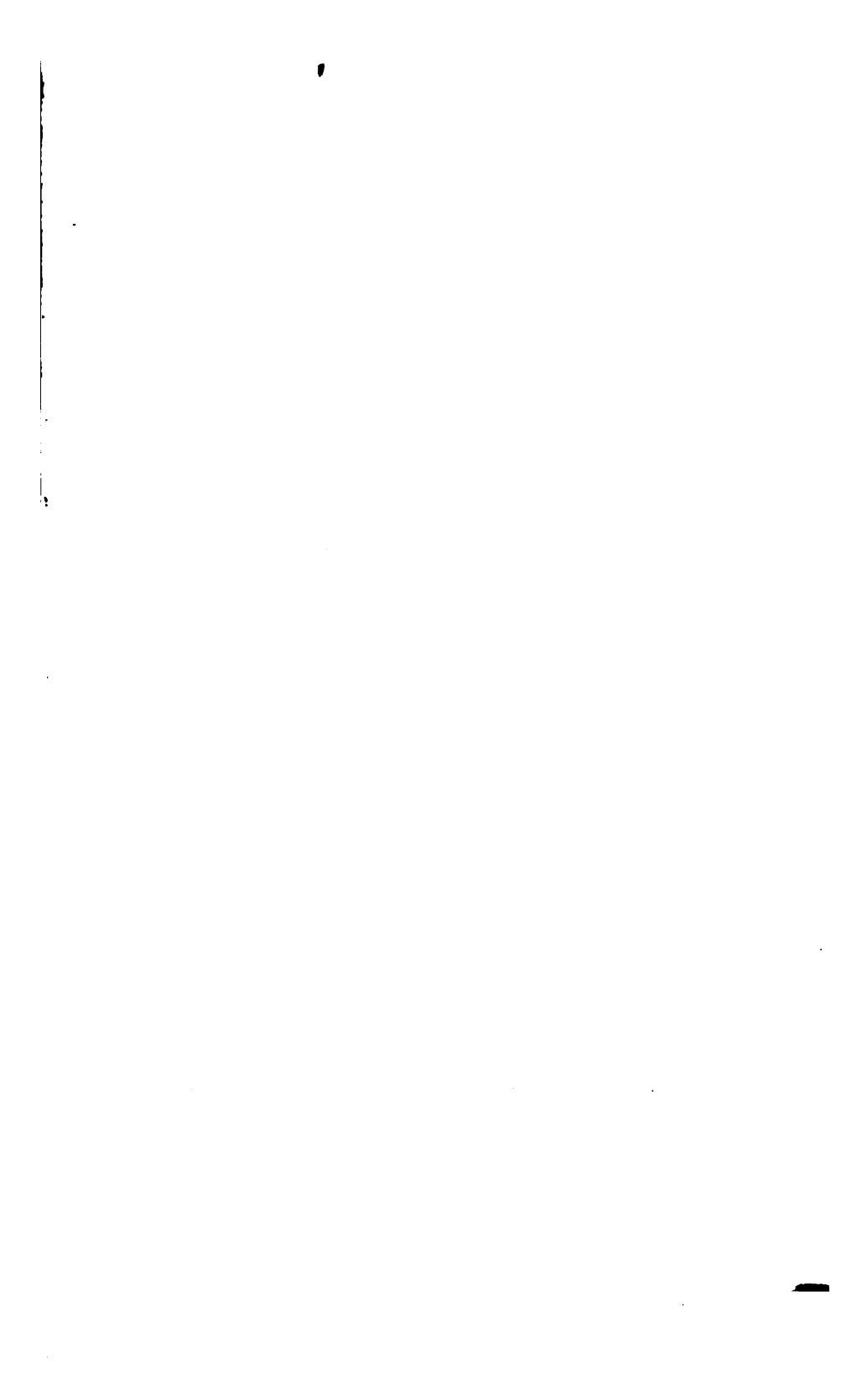
Unfortunately, "men are but men," and reason and experience show, at least with regard to our novelists, the evils both of the flattery and of the vanity induced by it. For there are instances in our literary annals of an author's receiving universal and extravagant praise, and being so far spoiled by it, as never to have written so well afterward. And this is one of the legitimate and the necessary results of what some Critics call *encouragement* to native genius. And another result is scarcely less pernicious. The applause lavished on those who *have* genius, is attracting the attention and the envy of those who have it *not*. The process intended to encourage authors is encouraging them *too fast* ; and, unless all precedent fails, our Critics will soon find that their hot-beds are producing more weeds than flowers. In fact, the dog-star of authorship is already in the ascendant ; books are multiplying like mushrooms ; and the monstrous opinion is gaining currency, that *any body can write a good novel*. Yes ! *any body can now* accomplish what, within ten years, the very loftiest intellect, and the most ex-

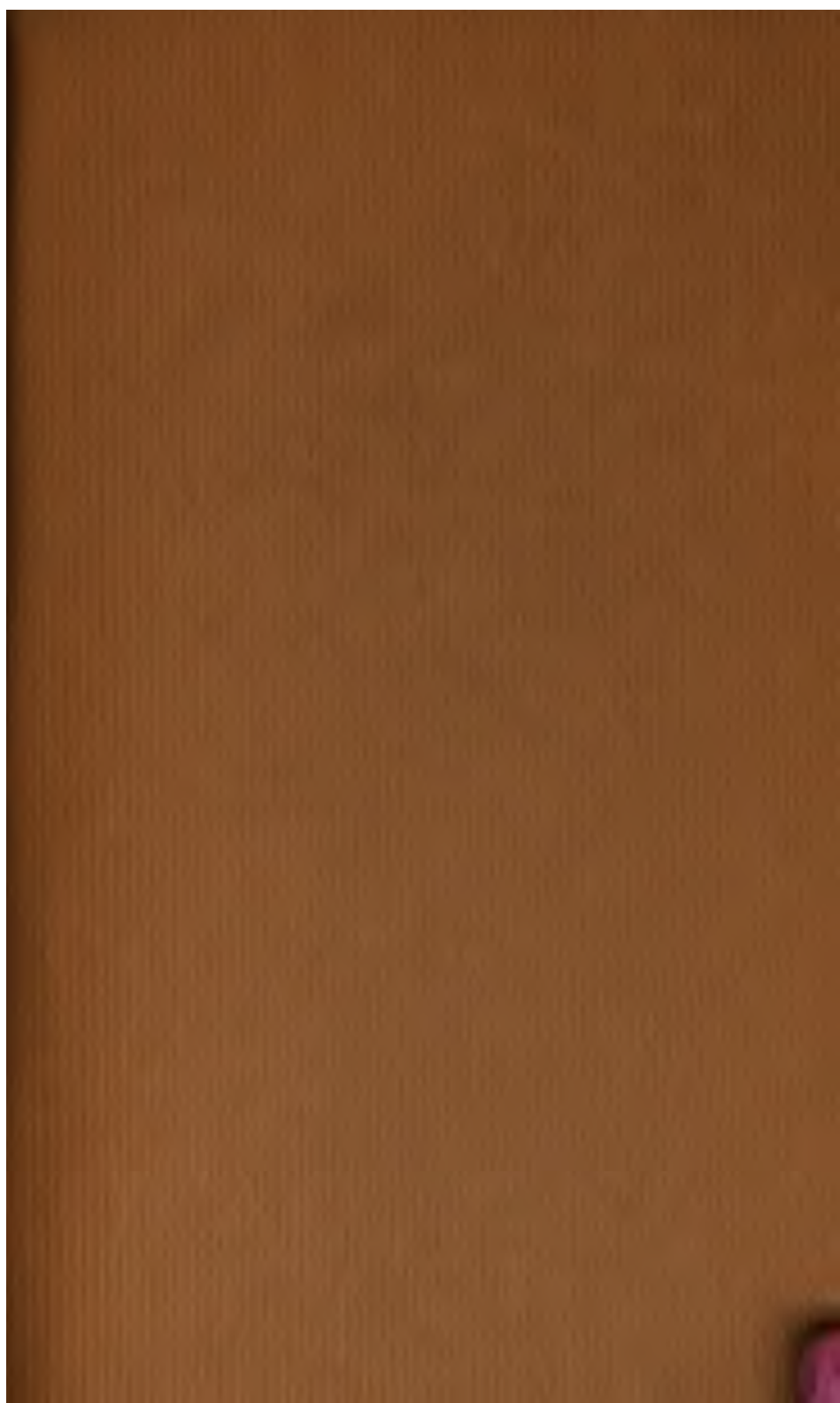
alted genius, have, in particular instances, failed to perform. Scott himself has written a poor novel—and so has Bulwer—and Edgeworth—and Cooper—and nearly every one who has attained enduring eminence, as a novelist, during the last forty years. And yet, inasmuch as the Critics will puff, and the people will sustain them in puffing, *any body* is competent to a task, the magnitude of which really requires a mind of some cultivation even to appreciate in the abstract!—Where this mania is to lead us, time alone can determine; but it is most certain, that unless Criticism soon asserts her legitimate prerogative, and brands this contagious folly with the shame it deserves, our literary annals will wear a blot which neither time nor change can obliterate.

Our situation is analogous to that of a people for a time enjoying repose under a just and good government; but at length aroused from that repose by the encroachments of tyranny and the imposition of iniquitous laws. What was originally devotion to the country, becomes now slavery to the ruler; and duty has changed from submission to resistance. Thus we, for a time, have been content to acknowledge the supremacy of the Critics; and, while they were capable and honest, we were wise to do so: but now that their decisions are tainted with error, and reliance on them is deception to ourselves, it is incumbent on us to cast off our allegiance, and compel them either to abandon their office, or renounce their heresy.

The manner of accomplishing this revolution cannot here be enlarged upon, but its results may be stated in a moment. Our National Literature will be relieved from the baneful influence of flattery and the artificial ripening of false criticism. Its growth will be checked in rapidity, but advanced in strength; and it will progress slowly, but surely, to the very highest eminence of fame.

" So the sage oak, to Nature's mandate true,
Advanced but slow, and strengthen'd as he grew !
But when, at length, (full many a season o'er,)
His head the blossoms of high promise bore ;
When steadfast were his roots, and sound his heart,
He bade oblivion and decay depart ;
Flung his broad arms o'er those who watch'd his rise,
His lofty top waved proudly in the skies ;
And, storm and time defying, still remains
The never-dying glory of the plains !"





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